

I went to the kitchen and retrieved an apple. When I came back to the couch, Lola turned off the TV and tossed the remote on the table. She gave me a curious expression. She said, "Why do you ride a bike, anyway, Lucius? That's what I want to know."

"Harold, Lola. I've told you before to call me Harold."

"Okay, *Harold*. So why the bike?"

"Environmental protest."

She raised her wonderfully expressive eyebrows. "Really."

"Somewhat," I said. "Also I don't have a ton of cash. Do you know what gas costs these days?"

"Next question," she said. "Have you ever been in love? I mean, before me."

"Well, there was Sheila," I said. "She was pretty hot."

Lola studied me intently. She waited.

"Anyway," I told her, "I've never been in love."

"I believe you, because it's very obvious. My last boyfriend was in love *all the time*. He was what we'd call a romantic. But you, you're different. You're terrified of real love. Trust me, I know it when I see it. It's like looking in the mirror."

"Okay." I bit my apple.

"But the thing is, everyone should at least have some sort of story. Love, unrequited love, broken love, the search for love, recovery efforts, you know, stuff like that. And if you don't have it, well, then, you've got to make shit up because the world requires conflict and heartache."

What was I to say? I shrugged.

"You know what I think? You set the fires. You, Lucius, are the Lunar Pyro."

"Get out of here," I said. "I'm not a pyromaniac. I'm a comicmaniac, maybe."

"True," she said. "But let's pretend anyway. You set the fires because your girlfriend— let's name her Bertha— the light of your life, the fire of your loins, broke your heart, and when she left, something deep within you died. It's the fires that make the pain go away for a time. Think of it, Lucius, the blaze, the energy, the excitement of it all. It makes you forget that you're heartbroken."

I turned toward her. "So what's Bertha like?" I asked. "Is she at least a hottie?"

Lola rolled her eyes. "What does it matter?" She thought for a while, before continuing. "Fine. Bertha Copeland, twentyone, blond hair, short legs, a little stocky— frankly, Lucius, I'm surprised at you— but generally soft-spoken, lacking backbone. It's a wonder she had the nerve to break up with you in the first place, the few prospects that she has. She's really

rather quite homely, now that I think about it, but her ugliness has fostered in her a good soul, a kind disposition, and that's what you loved."

"I did?"

"Yes, you did. Pay attention."

"Was she good in bed?"

"Hardly. But she had a way of looking at you after sex, you know, a meeting of the souls or something like that."

"Interesting," I said. "I'm starting to get horny. Can I call you Bertha?"

Lola flushed with embarrassment. She shook her head. She picked up the dictionary from the coffee table and opened to a random page: "Effluvious," she said.

"Effluvious," I said.

"It's wonderful when you do that."

"What?" I asked.

"Play along."